

our eyesight—or our will to live—but the war very much left its mark on us. After leaving the Army, I spent years writing about the

military, traveling several times to Iraq and Afghanistan, in part because I felt more comfortable being around those in uniform than those who didn't have firsthand experiences of the war. I didn't need a psychiatrist to tell me that wasn't the healthiest way of reintegrating, and I was intrigued when I heard about Rivera's journey. Could hiking a trail fill in missing pieces?

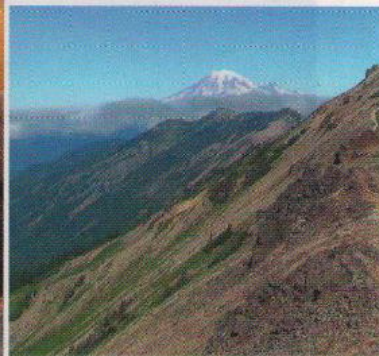
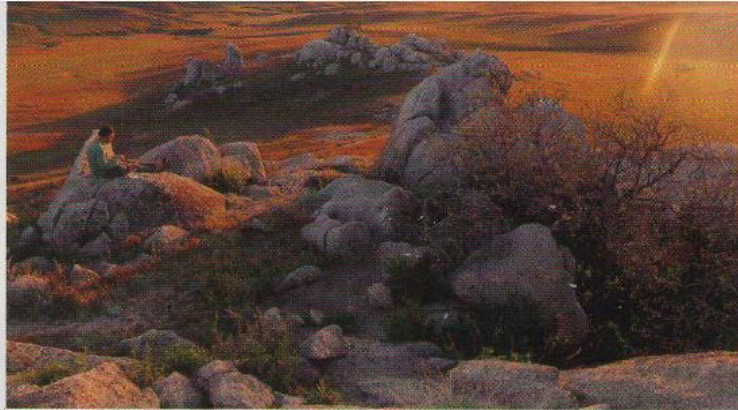
"You're supposed to get out of the Army and the world's your oyster," Rivera told me. "But all you're doing is applying for jobs you can't get, or getting jobs you don't want. Maybe you have a girlfriend who doesn't want to be with you anymore. Your self-confidence is eroding every day, and you're surrounded by people who don't understand where you're at. You have no control over whether your family will understand you or not,"

HELP A HERO HIKE

A new program encourages veterans to follow in John Rivera's footsteps.

Rivera was in the vanguard of what could be a wave of veterans thru-hiking America's long trails—and reaping the benefits. This year, Warrior Hike launches its Walk Off the War program with 13 wounded vets who will attempt to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. Veterans Sean Gobin and Mark Silvers conceived the project—and enlisted partners like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and Veterans of Foreign Wars—after their 2012 thru-hike on the AT. Participants get gear, food, transportation, and lodging support through program sponsors. Up next: In 2014, Walk Off the War will expand to the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide Trails as well. To apply for a spot, donate, or follow hikers, go to warriorhike.com.

No time for a thru-hike? Veterans Expeditions (vetexpeditions.com) connects vets with all types of outdoor activities.



he said, "or whether an employer will hire you or not."

But the trail, he said, can provide a sense of purpose. "You're in control of everything on the trail. The route, mileage, food, shelter. Whether you hike alone or with others."

In the morning, Hensrude walked back to his car, and Rivera and I headed north, higher into the Cascades, with stunning views of sparkling glaciers, rocky ridges, and alpine meadows. But toward day's end I didn't notice much of that, and the hike felt just like a road march: feet burning, shoulders aching, and head bent, watching the feet of the man to my front.

"The soldier's mind-set is perfect for this trail," Rivera said. "You get beat up every day and you take it."

We camped that night next to an alpine lake, and after dinner Rivera squatted at the water's edge, refilled his bottles, and stared at the mountainside that rose up from the lake.

"Only six days left on the trail," he said.

"Are you excited?" I asked.

He waited a moment before responding. Snowmelt trickled over rocks across the lake.

"I'm a little sad," he said.

"This has been my life for the last half a year."

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RIVERA STARTED AT DREXEL University in Philadelphia in 2001 on an Air Force officer training scholarship. Riding the train in his cadet uniform in the weeks after the September 11 attacks, passengers constantly

thanked him for serving. *But I haven't done anything yet*, he thought. If this was to be his generation's war, he didn't want to spend it sitting in a classroom, so he quit school, joined the Army, and trained as an infantryman.

I wasn't thinking about service and duty when I joined; I was drawn by the physical and mental challenges of military training and a long-standing curiosity about an American subculture about which I knew little. But our different paths brought us to the same place. Rivera and I arrived at Fort Drum at the end of 2002, and prepared for war. By early April, we were patrolling the streets of Mosul in northern Iraq, where we steeled ourselves for attacks that never came. Troops pushing up from the south had the hard fight, the real war. We were shot at just a few times, and roadside bombs hadn't yet become the insurgent weapon du jour.

We were deployed to Iraq again in 2004, for another year, and that was more like the war we'd seen on the news, with bombings and shootings and the very real possibility of death. Rivera spent several months of that deployment as a guard at the interrogation facility where suspected insurgents were questioned before they were released or sent to Abu Ghraib prison. He watched over men accused of killing his comrades and became familiar with the thunderous crack and concussive punch of rockets landing nearby.

After leaving the Army in 2005, Rivera returned home to southern California and joined a Riverside National Guard unit, which was deployed to Iraq for a year in 2008. This time he was doing convoy security, protecting the trucks that shuttled vital supplies between the sprawling bases and small